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Front Page

CAFE SOCIETY'S SIPPER AND TIPPER: ACCUSED SPY

The Hungarian-born New Yorker charged last month with spying for Soviet-bloc military intelligence, Otto Attila Gilbert, is a witty, charming man well known in New York's émigré community, where spying for the communists is considered treason twice over.

According to former close associates, Gilbert liked to spend long, idle hours in Hungarian cafes in New York, boasting of amorous adventures in European capitals and describing quirky business deals.

News reports following Gilbert's arrest in Augusta, Ga., gave no indication of how he earned a living. But to Hungarian-American friends around the tables at the Mocca Restaurant on New York's Second Avenue, Gilbert sometimes bragged that he sold bargain stationery to Fortune 500 executives.

Longtime acquaintances of Gilbert's told The Washington Post's Charles Fenyvesi that Gilbert culled names from Ivy League college alumni publications and, before pitching his products, told his prospects an old classmate had suggested he call. At other times during the 25 years he's lived in the United States, according to these acquaintances, Gilbert traveled the country in a Cadillac, staying in small towns just long enough to coax local leading citizens to attend a lavish party.

Gilbert boasted that at the parties he presented himself as a sophisticated,



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well-connected European whose New York uncle—alternately described as a beloved close relative or a monster—had just died and left him with a huge inventory of office supplies that he had

to unload at low prices. Then Gilbert proceeded to peddle as much as 10 years' supply of carbon paper, pens and stationery.

"Otto Gilbert was always out for himself," says a man who knew him for 20 years.

Another old acquaintance appraised Gilbert this way: "He had no politics, no principles. What he hated was work."

In 1965, eight years after he escaped from Hungary, Gilbert returned to his homeland. He later told friends that his car was searched at the border where Hungarian customs officials found 200 Austrian-made, plastic raincoats—then the rage in Budapest. He was sentenced to four years in jail for smuggling but was released within a year.

In the tight world of New York's Hungarian ghetto, it was noted that upon his return to the United States, Gilbert wore suits of a higher quality than before. He drove a Mercedes-Benz, and the man who had been derisively known as "Mr. Lipton"—because of his preference for tea—began sipping wine and tipping generously. He explained his enhanced style of life by saying he had received an inheritance, though his friends had not heard previously of any wealthy relatives.

The good life may have ended for Gilbert last month, when he allegedly went to Georgia to collect supposedly secret documents and film from a U.S. Army warrant officer the Hungarians thought they'd "recruited" five years ago. As it turned out, the career Army officer was a double agent wearing a body bug, and FBI agents arrested Gilbert in what the FBI pronounced one of the biggest espionage cases in American history.